



Musical Fish

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Introduction



It's safe to assume that there's always more going on during times of organizational restructuring than meets the eye. While stock analysts are somberly receiving a briefing on *a rational optimization in the company's deployment of key resources*, those aforementioned resources may find themselves at the sharp end of something uncomfortable from local management that is as brutal as it is bewildering.

That's because all restructuring involves the forced fusion of transparent business logic with secretive organizational politics. Don't be surprised when you find blood running down the walls or you stumble upon the unmarked graves. During reconstruction, business divisions are no rest home for the squeamish.

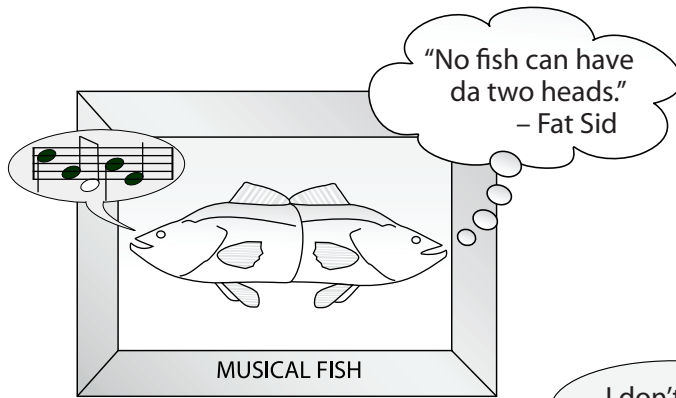
In such a situation the first task of a leader is to survive. It's also a time when a business coach can wield great power—as trusted pathfinder, impartial observer, and a keeper of great secrets.

So proceed with caution while travelling hopefully. If you're good at what you do, remember to stay confident in the outcome.

What are your personal rules for safeguarding information given to you in confidence?

Does "confidential" mean you must never tell anyone else?

Are you sure?



What do you want?

Now we're getting somewhere

I don't know what I want



THE CRITICAL QUESTION – WHERE THE OBJECT OF RESEARCH IS THE CLIENT



Musical Fish

Ethical Myths and Realities

The foundation of leadership is not about *what* you know, or even *whom* you know, but *how much* you know about yourself. Like Lisa.

Lisa runs a small treasury team. To be strictly accurate, that will remain the case until she's introduced to the new head of finance at eleven o'clock this morning. In that meeting Lisa will find she's fallen victim to the post-merger variation of that popular children's game known as musical chairs.

'No fish can have da two heads,' Fat Sid tells her, indicating that the music just stopped. 'Before, it is like this: You got your treasurer; we got our treasurer. Two companies, two treasures.' Lisa notices that Sid's taken the trouble to explain things in a way accounts people can readily understand. Pushing his palms together in a vice-like gesture, he continues, 'Now we're merged into da single organization, there can only be one treasurer for us all. I'm sure you can see da sense in dat?'

Lisa nods silently in the face of Sid's faultless logic, a lump swelling up in her throat.

'Lisa, the most important thing you gotta realize,' Sid confides with a fatherly smile, 'is dat the new treasurer ain't you.' The meeting takes all of five minutes. Lisa rushes off to frantically find Fink.

'I can only apologize for the immense ethical dilemma I've put you in,' she sobs, a teardrop trickling down her cheek. 'You're being paid by the very company I'm seriously thinking of leaving. I'll understand if you say you can't talk to me.'

Dr. Fink takes a bite out of his butter almond croissant, then sends it on its way with a large gulp of warm latte. 'How buoyant is the market right now for your kind of job?' he asks with a detached expression suggesting his mind is meandering along the sunny boulevards of some better world.

'I'm not sure,' answers Lisa with a hint of surprise in her voice and a pinch of indignation.

'Maybe you should find out?' suggests Fink obliquely.

‘Maybe I should,’ she says slowly through clenched teeth.

‘There really is no dilemma,’ adds Fink brightly. ‘If you want to go and they want you out, then you’ll both share a common interest. In that case the best help I can give,’ he imparts with a conspiratorial air, ‘is to speed things up a bit. It’ll be a lot less painful if we make it happen fast.’

This is turning into a bad hair day. Lisa is starting to question the wisdom of calling in her coach. The frustration she now feels reminds her of the sense of worthlessness she’d experienced in her uncomfortable conversation with Sid.

‘Of course,’ he continues, ‘if you’d wanted to stay and they’d wanted to keep you, you’d also share a common interest. There’d be no dilemma for me in that case, either.’ Lisa’s anxiety grows. Fink seems to be distracted with his own ethical riddles and hardly interested in her problems at all. Is this how a coach is meant to behave in troublesome times like these?

‘It could only start to become a problem if you each wanted a different outcome,’ adds Fink with a certain abstract animation. Now that he has rechanneled her emotion and captured her complete attention, Fink introduces his critical question, catching Lisa completely off guard.

‘Do you?’ he asks.

‘Do I what?’

‘Do you want a different outcome from the company?’

Lisa ponders. ‘I don’t know,’ she says at last, exasperated.

‘Why not?’ asks Fink.

‘Well, I don’t know what they want, and to be truthful, I don’t know what I want either.’

‘Good,’ says Fink. ‘Now we’re getting somewhere.’

‘Look,’ says Lisa, ‘I just lost the job I loved. I’ve lost my team. Sid’s talking vaguely about redeploying me elsewhere in the new organization.’

‘From what you say, it sounds as if *the company* wants you to stay,’ observes Fink. Of course he knows that the company as a continuous entity having a flawless memory, a high sense of fairness, and deep moral conviction never exists. In practice, all you ever get is the particular bunch of transient individuals who happen to be clocking in on that particular day.

‘Does Sid want you in his team?’ Fink inquires mildly.

‘You’d know the answer to that better than I would,’ says Lisa. ‘I know Sid confides in you, but I understand you can’t tell me what he says.’

‘I can’t?’ asks Fink.

‘No, of course you can’t,’ says Lisa.

‘And why is that?’ asks Fink.

‘Because of confidentiality, that’s why!’

‘Ah yes,’ agrees Fink. ‘You are of course correct to say that I can’t tell you what Fat Sid tells me in confidence.’

For the third time today, Lisa feels she’s getting nowhere fast. But Fink continues, ‘You *could* ask me what I think,’ he suggests.

‘I could ask you what you think about *what?*’ she asks.

‘You could ask me whether I think Sid wants you in his team.’

‘Let’s see if I’ve got this right,’ asks Lisa in amazement. ‘You can’t tell me what Sid’s told you because of client confidentiality?’

‘Right. But you can ask me what I think Sid would tell me if I were to ask him,’ responds Fink. ‘That would be totally ethical, as it would simply be my personal opinion. Naturally it would be based on everything I know. And I might get it wrong. But I’d be happy to answer you.’

‘And what would you say?’

‘You mean if you were to ask me if I think Sid wants to have you in his team?’ he teases, keeping up the suspense. ‘Yes,’ screams Lisa, distinctly pronouncing each word, ‘what would you say?’

‘I’d say he’d welcome you with open arms. Sid might lack a few social graces, but he certainly knows a solid finance person when he meets one. And good people are hard to come by. This company’s going through tremendous change right now, and many of the post-acquisition decisions have been based on political turf wars instead of cold business logic. Search beyond the obvious and look towards the future. This place will look very different in six months and there’ll be lots of opportunities turning up all the time for good people.

‘Of course, if you’d rather take your chances elsewhere...’ he muses.

‘No,’ says Lisa with a wry smile, ‘maybe not just yet. Why go out fishing when the music’s only just starting up again in here?’

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Develop your organizational logic.

- *What do you do when faced with madness – when what you’ve been told makes little or no sense?*
- *What in your organization makes no sense to you right now?*
[Hint: Think again about organizational announcements, oddly worded memos, strange conversations. Consider what isn’t being said and what information used to be shared in the past but isn’t shared now.]
- *What’s your hypothesis about what might really be going on?*
- *How will you test your theory? Will your test keep you safe?*
- *Are the potential rewards of experimenting worth the risks?*

BUZZ GROUP TOPICS

- *Does Dr. Fink’s intervention **help** Lisa and the business? How?*
- *Does Dr. Fink’s intervention **harm** Lisa or the business? How?*

BREAKOUT A: CONFIDENTIALITY

‘Is this how a coach is meant to behave in troublesome times like these?’

- *What are Dr. Fink’s rules of confidentiality?*
 - *Do you agree with them?*
 - *Are they effective?*
- *What “secrets” does Fink really give away, and what does he gain in return?*
- *What’s the worst that might happen if Lisa were to relate her conversation with Dr. Fink to Fat Sid?*
- *Which is more important to you—and what risks can you identify for the company, leader, and coach in:*
 - *Trying to help the right people end up in the right places, or*
 - *Keeping secrets secret?*

BREAKOUT B: ETHICS

Dr. Fink hints there might be an ethical dilemma if he were to find that Lisa and her boss wanted different outcomes.

- *How real is that dilemma?*
- *What steps might a coach use to prevent “taking sides” or getting “caught in the middle”?*
- *When must the coach put these defenses into place?*
[Hint: Consider the entire coaching engagement from contracting through retirement.]

COACHING PRACTICE EXERCISE / BREAKOUT C: COACHING DIALOG

- *How does emotion develop in this story and what effect does it have on the outcome?*
- *Is Dr. Fink using persuasion?*
- *If so, how?*

Dr. Fink could have asked his critical question right at the start of their conversation.

- *What effect would it have had then?*
- *What effect do you expect Dr. Fink’s initial words and actions have on Lisa’s emotions?*
- *Fink initially appears dismissive and uninterested in Lisa’s story.*
- *Why does he seem that way?*
- *Could Fink have done anything differently to help cement Lisa’s eventual strong desire to stay (at least for now)?*
- *Is Fink supporting one client in preference to another?*

PLENARY

- *What have you learned that will be useful in your practice of coaching and leadership?*
- *Did you sharpen your own rules of confidentiality since reading this story?*

SITUATIONAL QUESTION

- *How aware am I of the client's present emotional state?*
- *Do I need to check the client's emotional preparedness prior to moving into a logical discussion?*